

Author's success is romance writing

K mart 9240, Forest City, North Carolina personnel and training manager Martha Hooper is the mother of author Kay Hooper. Marsha has been with K mart for nine years.

Kay Hooper wrote and sold her first romance novel in 1980 at the age of 23.

She earned \$2,500. The following year, she made \$4,000 from writing. In 1982, her earnings climbed to \$19,000. This year, she has made over \$30,000 with 10 paperback novels published and six more under contract to Bantam and Jove Books. She also writes under the name Kay Robbins and has acquired a New York agent.

She has switched from an electric typewriter to a word processor and completes a novel in three to six weeks.

Last June, her book "On Wings of Magic" was the number one nationwide on Waldenbooks' romance bestseller list.

Ms. Hooper has been a part-time student at Isothermal Community College and worked at a local gold store. Now she is a full-time writer. Last month she conducted a seminar at the Georgia Romantic Writers Conference in Atlanta. She critiqued manuscripts and gave advice to published and unpublished writers.

"It's fun," Ms. Hooper says of her self-made business. "The times I want to scream are very rare. Usually, I giggle when I'm writing. I'm a romantic, an idealist."

Although Ms. Hooper makes success in the romance novel industry look easy, relatively few writers score as quickly as she has. They may be lucky enough to get one or two books published, but the demands of maintaining a prolific output takes its toll.

"You've got to build slowly," Ms. Hooper says. "Some people publish one book and disappear."

At the "Magnolia and Moonlight" conference in Atlanta, Ms. Hooper discussed writing techniques within the rules of romantic fiction. These rules include the introduction of certain characters at certain times and the establishment of sympathetic relationships.

Overall, romance rules are less strict than when Ms. Hooper began writing.

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To a large extent, she makes her own rules now that she has an established name in the field.

"I don't have to think about technique," says Ms. Hooper. "I get the ball rolling and it's pretty spontaneous. If the characters are good, they write the story."

Melinda P. Heffer of Lewisville, Texas, a reviewer for the national publication Romantic Times, says of Ms. Hooper's work, "As far as I'm concerned, she ranks up there with Jane Casil, the best in the business."

In the Kay Hooper/Kay Robbins canon, readers are enticed to laugh at situations one moment and cry another. This ability sets Ms. Hooper apart from her peers in the romance field.

"She's capable of writing with the best of them," says Ms. Heffer.

Romances are big business. The category accounts for 60 percent of all paperback book sales worldwide.

Readership is not confined to women.

"I know a husband of one of my readers who takes my books along when he goes deer hunting," says Ms. Hooper. "Then he goes out, props up the gun and reads the story. He's ashamed to do that at home."

As each new book rolls out of Ms. Hooper's word processor, relatives scan the pages trying to find which characters are based on them.

They search in vain.

"I don't use anybody like that," she says.

Ideas churn; characters flow naturally.

For example, she is working on a story that begins with a newspaper advertisement: young woman wants man, over 6 foot 2, preferably married but that is not a requirement. A man applies out of curiosity. Turns out the woman, who has gotten all sorts of weird reactions to her ad, just wants someone to look after a big dog she has in her apartment. The contact has taken place.

"That's how I start one," says Ms. Hooper. "The hard part is getting them together."

Ms. Hooper is proud of her work's appeal.

"The general idea of the press outside the romance industry is very belittling," she says. "And that's always irritating to me because nobody criticizes western novels or the science fiction community. Most ladies I've met who read my stories are bright and intelligent. There are a lot of college graduates, computer programmers."

The appeal of romance novels is fantasy, Ms. Hooper feels. "You don't have to be a realist in telling a love story," she says.

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